Why I'm Still a Presbyterian
Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
Matthew 9:14-17
October 26, 2014
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Someone once said that the trouble with religion is that it is providing answers to questions nobody is asking. I'm not sure I agree with that, but wheN it comes to the title of this sermon, I am absolutely sure it is true. No one is asking, "Why is he still a Presbyterian?"

It is a topic worthy of our time and attention because here we are in a Presbyterian church, and it is Reformation Sunday, a day that reminds us who we are, and where we came from, and are celebrating our heritage in fine style by remembering that our Presbyterian heritage is Scottish. A word about that. The one question I have been asked consistently since I arrived last summer is; "You are going to wear a kilt on Kirkin of the Tartans Sunday, aren't you? just like Blair always did?" Well, the answer is evident. In fact, I do own a kilt, Buchanan plaid – which I do think is one of the more, if not the most, striking of all the tartans. But, the fact is that the kilt and jacket, knee socks and sporran and dirk, the little dagger that tucks into the top of the knee socks, just in case you have to fight your way home from church – the truth is that the whole business weighs a lot and I simply couldn't figure out how to conveniently carry it on Southwest Airlines yesterday. The stole, however, is Buchanan, a gift given to me by two Lutheran nieces and a Lutheran nephew, for marrying the three of them. I always haul it out on Reformation Sunday and I'm glad for the opportunity to do it today.

[optional]

As far as Scottish bona fides, Buchanan is one of the major clans. And Buchanans have played prominent roles in Scottish history including as a tutor to Mary Queen of Scots. There is a Buchanan castle near the southern shore of Loch Lommond - not much of one but the ruins are still there and there is a Buchanan Arms hotel nearby where you can have tea and scones in the dining room where the carpet is a rich Buchanan plaid. I have served two Highland churches, we've lived and shivered in two Highland manses and best of all, my dear friend and long time colleague, Calvin Macleod, is beginning today as the new minister at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, the historical birthplace of Presbyterianism and the pulpit from which John Knox preached – "thundered" is the word most often used to describe Knox's preaching.

Enough of that. Some are calling our time "post-denominational," if not post-Christian. The old denominations, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal – have all lost a substantial percentage of their membership in the

past decades. We like to call ourselves “Mainline” denominations, but in light of what has happened to us, and continues to happen, “Sideline” might be more appropriate. And in the midst of that, our denomination, Presbyterian Church (USA), feels sometimes like it is coming apart at the seams, with hundreds of our 11,000 congregations pulling away, dropping out, forming new denominations or associations.

So it occurred to me to ask the questions: “Why am I – why are we – still Presbyterian?”

For me, the simplest answer is that I was born a Presbyterian, have pretty much loved the Presbyterian Church all my life and I intend to die a Presbyterian. But there is more to it than that, much more. In fact, as is the case with many, if not most of us, I left for a while, wandered around in the ecclesiastical wilderness and questioned whether there was a need for a church at all. But after considering the alternatives I came home. As T.S. Eliot wrote:

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” [Little Gidding]

So in June 1963 the PRESBYTERIAN Church ordained me to the ministry of Word and Sacrament and every Sunday except a very few, I have worn these two white strips of cloth. “Geneva Tabs,” they are called. John Calvin and other new Protestant clergy in 16th century Geneva wore them. So did John Knox and many of the early Presbyterians. And some of us still do.

It began in the middle of the 16th century, just a few years after an Augustinian monk and theology professor by the name of Martin Luther marched up to the castle church in Wittenberg and nailed 95 Theses to the door, outlining what he thought was wrong with the church. All he wanted to do was debate, have a discussion, but almost immediately his ideas were widely embraced and the Reformation literally exploded in Germany, moved quickly to France and the Low Countries. Luther was excommunicated, branded a criminal by the Holy Roman Emperor and spent time hiding in the castle fortress at Wartburg – where he compounded his criminality by translating the Bible into German and wrote the hymn everybody sings on Reformation Sunday – A Mighty Fortress is Our God.

A brilliant French lawyer, a humanist scholar, John Calvin, was attracted to Reformation ideas, became a political refugee fleeing persecution in France. He settled in Geneva, Switzerland where the city officials persuaded him to stay, and reform both the church and the city according to his new, revolutionary ideas.

Presbyterian beliefs are not significantly different from Methodist, Baptist or Roman Catholic beliefs. From the beginning we have affirmed the

historic faith of the church expressed in its confession and creeds. Every week you join millions of Christians around the world by affirming that faith in the ancient words of the Apostolic Creed. What distinguishes us and differentiates Presbyterians is not what they believe, but the way they are the church and the way they believe the church is called to be in the world.

Calvin's ideas were truly revolutionary. In the church, but also the state, he taught, individuals have the right to participate in their governance: to elect their pastors and leaders in the church, and magistrates in the city. That was entirely new in the 16th century, an age that assumed, and the church taught, that God gave authority to both church and political hierarchies – who ruled over everyone in the name of God. Calvin's ideas sounded a lot like heresy, or treason, which they were. It was the intellectual foundation for what became the republican form of democracy: individuals blessed by God with the freedom and right to choose their own leader. The Declaration of Independence reflects that thinking. So does the Constitution and the Bill of Rights – which church historian Martin Marty calls Calvinist documents.

And because individuals have political rights, there are limits on the power of the state – and the church – to coerce the conscience of the individual. "God alone is Lord of the conscience" is the way Presbyterians put it. An eloquent example of the radical implication of that is playing out on the world scene and in the news media, as a special Synod of Bishops, convened by Pope Francis, discusses long-held beliefs about the human family and human sexuality. The preliminary report reflected the idea that the church should respect the conscience of individuals who disagree with traditional church teaching about divorce and remarriage, heterosexual and homosexual relations. "No, no, no" conservative are responding. The church has the truth, the absolute, eternal truth in these matters regardless of what an individual's conscience suggests. Somewhere, John Calvin is smiling.

The idea is so radical that even Calvin himself did not always honor it. When a man by the name of Servetus – who was already in trouble for his heretical thinking, and condemned to death by both Catholics and Lutheran churches came to Geneva, he was arrested and Calvin consented to his execution – a sobering part of our story. But the heirs of John Calvin down through the centuries will be found on the front lines of the struggle for individual and political liberty – in Nazi Germany, or the American Civil Rights Movement, the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa and today as the nation wrestles with the issues of immigration.

And because citizens are responsible for their own ecclesiastical and political life, education became a priority, not just for the privileged elite, but for every man, woman and child. Public schools, public education, the responsibility of the whole community for the education of all the children – that's a Presbyterian idea.

John Knox, an exiled Scottish Catholic priest, found his way to Geneva, was influenced by John Calvin and returned to Scotland where he took on the monarchy in the name of freedom but also established public schools, education for all in the entire nation of Scotland.

Wherever Presbyterians went they established schools – throughout the world and in the colonies Presbyterian ministers founded schools – along the expanding frontier, beside the church — and often served as the first schoolmaster. The majority of our early colleges and universities were established by Presbyterians and Presbyterians were instrumental in the founding of public universities, including Ohio State and The University of Michigan. There are 60 colleges and universities that are related to our church including fine Texas institutions: Austin College, Trinity University, Schreiner University – and in Kingsville, a remarkable institution – The Presbyterian Pan-American School – for children from Mexico originally, but now serving students from Central America, China, Korea, and Africa. I was delighted to learn that Preston Hollow supports scholarships at the Pan American School.

John Calvin's basic theological construct was the Sovereignty of God, the absolute sovereignty of God – which means that nothing else – no earthly political structure, no church hierarchy, no intellectual concept or truth claim is absolutely sovereign; only God is sovereign. And so Presbyterians have been always and consistently in the forefront of the search for truth. One of our best thinkers, Edward Farley, put it this way: "If we (Presbyterians) have a genius, it is not so much some distinctive deposit of doctrine as it is a way of transcending our deposited traditions under the constant nagging pressure of the question of trust." [The Presbyterian Predicament p. 52]

Because we believe so passionately in the sovereignty of God and the sanctity of the human conscience, we believe the question of truth is an open one, and that we are called to seek truth with our minds as well as our hearts and spirits. We believe science, the scientific methods, are gifts of God that must be celebrated and protected – even when they seem to challenge cherished tradition. We are never threatened by the intellectual pursuit of truth. We are not Biblical literalists, nor confessional literalists. We believe that religious leaders can be wrong. We believe our creeds don't get it all right, all the time. Only God is sovereign and there is always more truth to be revealed to us.

John Calvin thought that the welfare of the community was the church's business; that the faith of the church is expressed, not only in its liturgy and creeds but also in the world, socially, politically and economically. In Geneva Calvin was responsible for the enactment of the first labor laws, regulating child labor, and marketplace regulations. And ever since, Presbyterians have been expressing themselves about politics and

economics, often to the chagrin of their own members. Religion and politics? A Presbyterian minister, John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey – later Princeton University, was a member of the Continental Congress and the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

When that same congress convened in Philadelphia in 1787 to write a Constitution, the Presbyterians were holding their first General Assembly down the street and several men were members of both bodies. The first thing the General Assembly did was address itself to the new President, George Washington.

We've been doing it ever since. We believe that the point of the Incarnation, God coming into the world in the person of Jesus was to transform and save – individuals and the world itself.

And John Calvin was ecumenical. The one thing Presbyterians have never said is that our truth is the only truth and our way is the only way. We have always seen ourselves as part of the Holy Catholic Church of Jesus Christ, not the only part.

I'm still a Presbyterian because I believe these ideas and values are critical, worth remembering, celebrating, and nurturing and protecting. I believe they are particularly important because they are not celebrated by much of the religion that is popular today, conservative evangelical religion that fills basketball arenas on Sunday morning, that focuses – not on the world God so loves, nor human relationship, nor issues like justice, and a viable future for our children and grandchildren, but on me, mine – my health and happiness and success and security, both fiscal and spiritual. I believe these precious Presbyterian values, at this particular time in American history, are like leaven in the loaf, a small but persistent light in the darkness.

I'm Presbyterian by birth, but I was never more sure, nor grateful for this unique tradition of ours than at the end of a year I was privileged to spend as Moderator of the General Assembly of the PC(USA). The Moderator of the General Assembly is the ambassador, pastor and cheerleader for our 11,000 congregations, schools and colleges, and mission projects and partnerships in this country and throughout the world. The Moderator travels a lot and sees a lot and after a year of it, I found myself more deeply and more thankfully a Presbyterian than ever before.

Sue and I visited the Presbyterian/Reformed Church of Cuba, before the current loosening of restrictions and general control. We talked with pastors and laypeople who bravely kept their churches open – in the face of official hostility, pastors whose every sermon was monitored by a government intelligence officer with a tape recorder in the congregation every Sunday. We met with a couple our age, academics, who son – a fine basketball player who was told by the regime that he could not play in the

Cuban national basketball team unless he renounced his Christian faith – which he did, and then defected while the team was in Europe and not heard from since.

We visited the Presbyterian/Reformed Church of Croatia, another tiny but resilient church that has been in that part of the world, heavily Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim, for centuries. The shooting had just stopped and we visited Vinkovci, where the Orthodox so hated the Catholics that they blew up the Roman Catholic Cathedral, and the Catholics so despised the Orthodox that they retaliated by blowing up the Orthodox Cathedral. The only thing Catholics and Orthodox agreed on was mutual hatred of the Bosnian Muslims. In the midst of that the tiny Reformed Church hung on for dear life and one day took a direct mortar hit to its beautiful sanctuary. Presbyterian(USA) One Great Hour of Sharing funds had helped repair the lovely church building. We were there on Easter Sunday to help dedicate the new sanctuary and I preached – with an interpreter – and presided at the Lord's Table that was set with obvious care and love. In that church the women sit on the one side and the men on the other. Sue sat with the Croatian women – who after the benediction smothered her with hugs and kisses and tears of gratitude.

I keep a picture of that small, elegant sanctuary, restored by my church – as a reminder of who I am and why I am still a Presbyterian.

Thanks be to God.